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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education will have to change themselves radically if they are seriously interested in instituting open admissions policies, and one of the biggest obstacles to creating a learning environment conducive to a new kind of student will be overcoming institutional pride in its own elitism. Students have traditionally entered the university with the understanding that they have to take certain courses, and that their attendance at the institution depends on their academic performance as judged by the faculty. For ghetto students, this is practically a guarantee for failure. Under a really open admissions policy, the student should have the opportunity to have a series of experiences that he considers desirable for himself at that time, without requirements, grades, or accreditation. When the student decides that he wants to prepare for a specific profession or degree, he can readily transfer to a credit program. The non-credit program could be staffed by the nonacademic personnel from the community. Learning to take responsibility for one's own learning is the central aspect of individual growth and this will be fostered by a policy which allows students to help determine what is relevant to their education. Such a policy will demand institutional reorganization into smaller units, such as cluster colleges. (AF)

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OPEN ADMISSIONS: BEFORE THE DELUGE*

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I have been asked to present my own notions of how colleges and universities will be changed if they adopt policies of open admission. I interpret this assignment as implying more than an expansionist adaptation to the fact of larger and more diverse student bodies, in the form of larger institutions with more extended bureaucracies offering a wider array of courses. We've been doing that for some decades now, but we have usually reacted, somewhat belatedly after rather than before feeling pressures from a new breed of students. I believe that we shall not be ready for a more radical expansion until we, as institutions of higher learning, become more willing to adapt to changed conditions than has so far been apparent. What I shall have to suggest, therefore, will consist of more than minor modifications of things as they typically are now.

To put it starkly, I think our institutions of higher education should either forget about open admissions or prepare to change themselves in fairly radical ways. Let me remind you that no "selective" college or university, in spite of some herioc attempts, has so far really succeeded in incorporating any considerable body of ghetto students or others not previously considered admissable into their present systems. Some institutions that have tried it have learned a lot about their mistakes and are still trying. At any rate, my argument is that if you're going to do it at all, you might as well be prepared for a lot of changes.

The biggest of all obstacles to creating a learning environment that will nurture new kinds of students is, I suspect, our institutional pride in our own elitism. Wesleyan University and Antioch College, to mention two very different instances, can justly boast of their histories of academic distinction; both, with the best will in the world, have stumbled if not fallen over the issue of quasi-open admission. Our present practices, insofar as they are based on doctrines of elitism, are clearly not adequate for a serious move toward educating a wider range of students.

The First Step: Initial Understandings

Every student entering a college or university, whether or not he stops to think about it, recognizes some sort of implicit contract between himself and the institution. One common version of the terms accepted by the student goes somewhat as follows:

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> We /the college or university_/ will let you in, both because we have something you want and because we think you'll be a credit to us. But you can stay only if, as judged by us, you meet our academic standards. And if you want a degree you'll have to take whatever courses we prescribe.

Now contrast this with an implicit contract of the following nature:

> Everyone who is interested in what we have to offer is invited, as long as we have room. You'll have to set your own standards of success, which will probably change a good deal, and choose (within the limits that we can provide) the kinds of experiences that will help you attain them. We hope you can stay as long as you feel that you're meeting your own standards.

I have phrased these "contracts" as differently as possible in order to suggest that initial understandings as divergent as these might have profoundly different effects on what students learn in college. And, since it seems clear that a policy of open admissions would require changes on the part of colleges and universities, I think the first change should be in the initial contracts. I shall go on, naturally, to indicate that what happens to students afterwards must be faithful to the contract.

For ghetto students and others who would for the first time be going to college under a policy of open admissions, this matter is of crucial importance. I think we have now learned that the first of my two contracts is for many of them a guarantee of future failure, and they are not slow to recognize it as such. The dilemma, for both student and institution, can be simply stated. If the previously inadmissable students are expected to take the present array of courses, and to be judged by present standards, a great many of them will not make the grade. And if, on the other hand, their academic menu consists primarily of "watered down" or remedial courses, they will be regarded both by themselves and others as second-class citizens. Neither alternative represents a constructive educational experience. In short, for institutions to invite new breeds of students without changing themselves is an invitation to debasement in one way or another. Change in one part of the system will, whether we like it or not, induce changes in other parts--without which either the system will break down or the new input will have to be rejected. The analogy of transplating a body organ is not far-fetched.

Making Good on the Contract: The Necessary Changes

I suggest, however, that those of us who may be moving toward open admissions should not exaggerate the problem. We have nothing to lose except our present practices in educational program, staffing, and institutional organization--together with our present system of allocating funds.

How is it possible to offer diverse kinds of learning experiences, suitable for students of very different intellectual capacities, and of different educational and social class backgrounds? How can this be done without creating a class system within the college or university? These are the general problems, to be kept in mind as we consider the more specific problems.

Educational Program. The open-admissions institution, as I've already indicated, will find itself between the devil and the deep blue sea--academic failure for many students if current "standards" are maintained, and second-class citizenship if they are not. Since standards of formal academic success tend to adapt themselves to student constituencies, that problem will be the easier one to solve. So I'll turn to this question: Is a self-conscious adoption of the second "implicit contract" possible, in ways that ward off invidious distinctions among groups of students? If so, at least some of the sense of psychological debasement can also be averted.

If both students and institutions should really take the second contract seriously, students would not begin by entering a formal curriculum of successively prescribed courses. Instead, each one would have a series of experiences that he considered desirable for himself at that time. Postponing, for the moment, questions of grading and certification, my present point is simply that a system in which every student is expected to do his own thing can at least minimize the social distance between those who choose to do very different things. I would argue, furthermore, that under such a system the likelihood of learning to choose increasingly complex and previously unfamiliar things is greater than in institutions governed by the first contract.

But what about grading, course credits, and certification? Let me offer the proposition that in most institutions of higher learning the societal function of certifying students for future employment or for higher levels of education is predominant over the function of individual learning. This tendency is likely to be increased in open-admission institutions because, for so many students not admissable elsewhere, becoming eligible for a good job would be a primary motivation. But this presumed fact suggests to me not that universities should add trade schools to their existing programs, but rather that such students need wider ranges of experience that might lead to wider horizons and increasing self-discovery.

To such students, as to all others, I hope that open-admission institutions could offer some version of the second contract. Its implementation would run somewhat as follows. "If you want to learn something about the world of business (for example), why don't you join a group of students with the same interests? Never mind, now, about grades and credits. If you find that you want to continue in that line, you can join other groups later, and work for credits that you are sure you want. Maybe we can help you find a part-time job where you can give it a try. If and when you want us to certify you, we'll make an honest report--with your help--of what you have done and what you want to do next. Of course we have a formal degree program, too, if you should later decide that you want that...." The determined premedical student, to give another example, would be advised in similar fashion, but with more attention to the prerequisites likely to be demanded by medical schools.

The considerable number of students who have no special vocational aspirations would be inducted in similar ways. I see no need for requiring a fixed number of courses each term, nor even a fixed set of distribution requirements for all students. Those who at some time decide to work for a formal degree should of course be informed of its requirements. The common features of the second contract are pluralism and a lack of institutional

concern with grades, credits, and degrees. The individual student may himself develop such concerns (for example, in order to be accepted by a law school), but self-discovering and exploration should be the keynotes. To put it in negative terms, the institution is not primarily a mechanism for sorting people out by assigning grades, credit hours, and degrees. As to those functions, it limits itself to reporting that a student has done such-and-such, as whatever levels of complexity or difficulty it seems desirable to report.

What I am advocating, in short, is institutional planning for two paths toward education, and ready avenues of transfer from the one to the other, together with the possibilities of pursuing both of them simultaneously. One would be for formal credit. The other would not, being justified only on grounds of the student's interest in a certain kind of experience. I would hope that even students hell-bound for certification would spend some of their time treading the less formal path.

Such a system would probably strike most educators as preposterous--chaotic if not anarchic, difficult to staff and in any case impossible to finance--partly because it would not be exclusively devoted to the winnowing-out process by which those who survive are eventually certified, in terms of grades and credits and degrees.

As to staffing, I see new opportunities as well as new problems. Few colleges and universities have availed themselves very fully of the "non-academic" resources of their own communities. There are usually lawyers, engineers, businessmen, local government officials of wisdom and experience whose services would enrich the curricular fare that is now offered by their neighboring institutions. I suspect that their lack of "teaching degrees" is often the principal obstacle to exploiting their knowledge. I also suspect that many of them would be more effective teachers than many a professional academic.

As to financing such a program, I shall limit myself to two brief comments. It has been the history of education in this country that, with extensions of our clientele of students toward "mass education," either public or private support has somehow been found. I know of no reason why the presently proposed extensions should be an exception. And, second, those institutions that commit themselves to some form of open admissions will want to re-examine their priorities. To some degree at least, change of any kind threatens the status quo. New programs sometimes lead to the excision of dead or dying wood. And sometimes the surgery can be beneficial--to the organism if not to the sacrificed member.

Suppose criteria of individual growth are to be seriously considered in planning for openly admitted students. Then the educational program must be viewed not just in terms of cirrculum--which, after all, is only a formal way of organizing experiences of learning. I can think of no more central aspect of individual growth than learning to take responsibility for one's own learning. And this cannot very fully occur, I have come to believe, in a setting where most of the decisions that affect the student's educational experiences have been made in advance by someone else. Learning to take responsibility for one's own learning (the apparent redundancy is deliberate) is not just a matter of making choices for oneself, however freely, among ready-made alternatives. Behind those individual choices lie the processes

by which the alternatives themselves are determined, and participation in those processes can add a powerful incentive to learning. My own observation--not, I must add, primarily in open-admissions institutions--suggests another advantage of student participation in planning educational programs: it often leads to better decisions. And it seems to me a reasonable prediction that this would be all the more likely in institution that include students of kinds that most faculty have little experience with.

I have found that for many of my faculty colleagues this is a hard saying--if not, indeed, a false one. If there is any area in which "we are the experts," large numbers of college teachers feel that it is the curriculum. "Students don't even know what they need to know; why should they decide, in their ignorance? They come to be taught, don't they?" I could argue (and I have) with every phrase in this version of a not uncommon rationale. Here I need not say much more than that students--and especially those to whom we may for the first time open our doors--know many things that we do not, including matters of crucial relevance to their education. And I shall add only that no one is proposing that they do the deciding, but only that they participate in it--genuinely and openly.

The most convincing statement of this general position that I have seen in print (though not written specifically about education) appears in Bennis and Slater's little book, The Temporary Society (1968). Briefly and to me convincingly, they argue that with the increasing tempo of technological and social change only democratic procedures will prove adequately adaptive, because without the voices of the young, who are more familiar with new turns of events than are their elders, and who are less committed to things as they are, institutional change will not keep up with societal change. I hope you'll read it and ponder, before you discard that idea.

Just as the second contract implies participatory democracy, so the latter implies forms of institutional organization that facilitate and support it. Questions both of structure and of size thus arise. Highly centralized or hierarchical structures prevail not only in the megaversity, where they are usually justified in terms of convenience and "efficiency," but also in small colleges, where the traditional forms have typically suffered little change. Let me assume, without arguing the point, that hierarchical structures of centralized decision making are not congenial to participatory democracy. If so, then alternatives are not beyond reach. We need only, so to speak, turn the pyramidal structure on its side: instead of vertical layers, horizontal ones--coordinate and "equal," but for most purposes functionally autonomous. The contemporary movement toward "cluster colleges" is one example of such restructuring.

Suppose that openly admitted students are asked, on entrance, not about their academic histories but about what it is that they want and haven't got, right now. Suppose they are then informed about several sub-divisions (programs? sub-colleges?) which they might find congenial. Or a case could be made for assigning them, initially, at random to one unit or another. Each unit would be limited to a few scores or a few hundreds of students, and each would have its own staff. Each unit would include students and staff who had belonged to it the previous year. The entering student's first experiences would be designed for introducing him into participation: How has

the system worked before? How can he use it for his own purposes, or perhaps change it? What has been the experience of other students who have interests like his own? How can he get involved in college government, and how would he go about it to arrange for work not now included in the college's offerings? Formal enrollment in courses should be flexible until he has been able to profit from such experiences. Above all, he should be able to discover for himself, at the outset, that some version of the second contract really works. This, I think, is not likely to occur under the conventional practices of hierarchical organization.

What about the mix of students, according to such a plan? How much should we be concerned about the possibility of a solid concentration in a sub-college unit of students not previously admissable, or of all-back or all-white populations? It seems likely that such trends would occur--they already exist, with restricted admissions. I think my own concern would be only that such homogeneity be avoided at the outset, insofar as possible. One advantage of open admission is the possibility it affords that different kinds of students can learn from one another.

Elitism Reconsidered

Such considerations bring us back to issues of elitism. Colleges and universities can't live without it, for in one way or another it's often at the heart of our sense of identity. Nor can open-admissions institutions live with it--at least in its traditional forms.

If by elites we may mean people of exceptional talent or ability, we shall still have them, both as students and as teachers. If we extend the term to include specialized, high-level activities (e.g., art or science for its own sake, without regard for utility), again I see no danger that this will disappear. But the term has often connoted exclusiveness or separatism: the true university is really for scholars and researchers, present or future, and other kinds of people should do their teaching and learning elsewhere. This is a doctrine of elitism, not of persons nor of activities but of institutions, and it would seem to be incompatible with policies of open admission.

I have tried to deal not with questions of how many or what kinds of institutions should adopt such policies, but only with what I think will have to be changed if they are adopted, and are to have effective educational outcomes. Since I believe in pluralism, I see no reason to argue that all colleges and universities would learn something about themselves and about the learning process if they should seriously make the attempt. Surely there are some principles of education that apply in similar ways to students whom we usually categorize as being either "college material" or "not college material." Surely there advantages, too, in discovering how different kinds of students can learn from each other--and how their teachers can at the same time benefit.

Decisions to undertake policies of open admission will, I hope, be taken not as acts of charity but as steps by which educational institutions can participate in rather than merely reacting to changing patterns in American society. Those colleges and universities which choose to take the path--with foreknowledge and with some courage--can also improve themselves.